

MANNER OF ATTACHING COMPONENT ELEMENTS TO FILTRATION MATERIAL SUCH AS MAY BE UTILIZED IN RESPIRATORY MASKS

Technical Field

[0001] The present invention relates to a technique for attaching one or more component elements to filtration material including such material of the type that is particularly suitable for use in the making of respiratory masks. Specifically, the present invention relates to methods of attaching one or more components to filtration material, wherein a preferred method is one that is also suitable for automated production as part of a high speed manufacturing system. The present invention also relates to the combination of filtration material with a component that is attached together in accordance with the method of the present invention. Typical components attached to respiratory masks, for example, include valves, headbands, and the like.

Background

[0002] Filtration material may be incorporated within any number of different types of filters and/or may be formed or otherwise constructed into filtration devices. In any case, it may be desirable to attach a component element to the filtration material in order to facilitate the incorporation of the filtration material with other elements or in constructing the filter material as a filtration device. Filtration material itself typically comprises a media capable of permitting fluid flow through the media but defining orifices or passages through the media which limit the passage of particulate matter or the like through the filter media. Such media may otherwise be designed for removing any constituent component of a fluid from the fluid as it passes through the filtration media instead of or in addition to particulate removal (i.e. by attraction or chemical reaction).

[0003] The present invention was developed, in particular, for the production of respiratory masks that are utilized in a wide variety of applications for protecting a user's respiratory system from contaminants and/or unpleasant or obnoxious gases within the air. Moreover, medical care providers utilize such respiratory masks for preventing the spread of harmful microorganisms either to or from the provider.

[0004] Various forms of respiratory mask are commercially available; some of which are categorized as “disposable” because they are intended to be used for relatively short periods of time. Other non-disposable respiratory masks may include replaceable filters even though the masks themselves are reusable. Disposable masks typically have a mask body that is formed predominantly from an air filtration material and that is shaped or configurable to fit over at least the nose and mouth of a person. Replacement filters for non-disposable masks typically include a layer of air filtration material along with certain structural components whereby the filter is connectable with the reusable mask.

[0005] Disposable respiratory masks can be generally classified into one of several categories, some of which are noted as follows: 1) flexible flat masks that are sometimes folded or pleated and that are sized to fit relatively flatly over a person’s nose and mouth; 2) foldable masks that can be folded in a flat state and unfolded into a cup-like usable state where it can fit over a person’s nose and mouth and; 3) molded masks that are pre-shaped into their usable state. Of these, either type of the fold-flat masks can be packed flat and may be provided with appropriate seams, pleats and/or folds to accommodate usage. The foldable type masks that can be unfolded into a cup-like state are usually formed with panels that are defined by seams, pleats and/or folds that enable the mask to be opened into the generally cup-shaped configuration. Molded masks, on the other hand, are pre-formed into a desired face-fitting configuration and generally retain that configuration during use. When a fold-flat or molded mask is in use, the mask body forms a breathing zone to at least some degree around at least the nose and mouth of the wearer. Air is drawn into the breathing zone through the air filtration material when the wearer inhales.

[0006] Disposable respiratory masks generally incorporate at least one attached component that is attached to or through a layer of filtration material or composite material having a layer of filtration material. For example, almost all such masks include a headband, ties or other means by which the mask can be secured to the user’s head. Furthermore, such masks also are known to incorporate other attached components including valves, nose clips and face shields.

[0007] Some methods that are frequently employed for attaching such components are based upon the use of thermal welding or ultrasonic welding, such as

described, for example, in US patent no. 5,325,893. These methods are advantageous in that they can attach such a component in a way such that the component is effectively sealed with the filtration material. That is, because the welding can be done all the way around the component, the filtration material, which is likely a fibrous material, can be thermoplastically welded with itself and the component. Thus, the component can be sealed to the filtration material so that the filtering affect of the filtration material is not compromised at the attachment interface. However, welding techniques are generally more costly and complex than others in that they require the provision of relatively complex equipment for conducting the ultrasonic or thermal process, and, especially where fibrous material is connected with a component, requires a sufficient control system to make sure that a good attachment results.

[0008] Alternatively, for some components and other forms of respirators, adhesive bonding is known to be used. The benefit of adhesive bonding is that, like welding, an effective attachment can be more easily provided. That is, as long as the adhesive is compatible with both the filtration material and the component , it can be applied all the way about the component to create a good attachment. The seal created by the attachment, however, is enhanced only where the adhesive is applied. That is, an external layer (which may be filtration material or otherwise) may be attached and sealed with the component by the adhesive, but other layers may not be sealed with one another, the external layer, or the component. As such, a good seal (i.e. one that doesn't permit larger particles to pass than is the function of the filter, for example) may be compromised. In any case, such an adhesive attachment technique requires the added expense of the adhesive and further requires the provision of a means to dispense and control the application of the adhesive. This adds cost and complexity.

[0009] In other situations, mechanical clamping techniques are also known, including the use of fasteners like staples or other clamping structure. Such mechanical systems have the general advantage that they do not require complex bonding equipment such as thermal and/or ultrasonic generators and controls or adhesive dispensing and applying devices and controls. However, a mechanical clamping system itself may, on the other hand, require complex alignment and control mechanisms instead. Examples of mechanical attachment techniques are disclosed in US patent nos. 5,374,458 and

5,080,094 and in published international applications WO 96/11594 and 96/28217. The biggest concern when utilizing a mechanical fastener or clamping system is the creation of an effective seal, i.e. one that will not permit a significant quantity of any contaminant to pass that is otherwise intended to be excluded by the filtration material to which the component is attached. This problem may vary depending on where on the mask, for example, the component is attached (such as, for example, directly in front of the users nose as contrasted with a point off to the side). Moreover, certain mechanical clamping methods may not only require the provision of an additional fastening component, but also may also require additional alignment and fastener or clamp manipulation steps.

[0010] These attachment methods are also employed in other fields when it is necessary to secure components to fluid filtration material, for example in the manufacture of air filters, such as vacuum cleaner bags, and oil filters. An example of a mechanical clamping technique used outside the field of fluid filtration is disclosed in US patent nos. 4,909,434; 5,125,886 and 5,199,635 where mechanical clamping is used to secure a pour spout to a liquid container (in some cases in combination with heat sealing).

Summary of the Present Invention

[0011] The present invention overcomes the deficiencies and shortcomings of the prior art by providing a mechanical attachment technique that is suitable for attaching components to filtration material and for creating an effective seal between the filtration material and the component. Moreover, the present invention includes such a technique that can be accomplished as part of an inline production system and that is particularly usable in high-speed production lines.

[0012] Moreover, a method of the present invention utilizes a component that is to be attached to the filtration material that has a base side and an extension member that is used in clamping the component to the filtration material by passing the extension member through the filtration material and having at least some portion thereof in contact with the filtration material or a composite material containing filtration material on the other side of the material from the base side thereof. Preferably, the extension member is in contact with the other side of the material all of the way around an opening that is

provided through the material and through which the extension member passes so as to create an effective seal completely about the component.

[0013] The method of the present invention includes a step of inserting the extension member of the component through the opening of the material and thereafter performing a deforming step for causing the extension member to be deformed to have a surface thereof in sufficient contact with the material so as to make an effective seal between the component and the material. Preferably, the material is at least partially compressed between the deformed surface and the base of the component during the deforming step so that an effective seal is enhanced, especially where the filtration material is a composite web that comprises more than one layer (so that the plural layers also seal to one another).

[0014] Such a technique and method of attaching a component to filtration material is particularly advantageous in that the components can be relatively easily attached to such filtration material by a mechanical clamping arrangement that is effective for providing an effective seal with the filtration material with a minimum of system complexity. The method of the present invention does not require the provision of any additional component that has to be handled and positioned in addition to the component since the extension member is positioned at the same time that the component is positioned to the filtration material. Preferably, the extension member is made integrally with the component. The deformation step can be conducted as a cold forming process without the addition of heat or as part of a thermal or heat forming process depending on the material from which the extension portion of the component is made. The method of the present invention is particularly adaptable for use as part of an inline production system that may be conducted at relatively high speeds.

[0015] More especially, the present invention is concerned with providing an alternative method of attaching a component, for example an exhalation valve, to air filtration material forming part of a respiratory mask.

[0016] The aforementioned advantages of the present invention can be achieved by providing a component and a web comprising filtration material, wherein the component is attached to the web that includes first and second major surfaces and an aperture; and the component comprises a base that is located against the first major surface of the

material and an extension member that extends from the base through the aperture and has a deformed portion thereof that has been turned back toward the base portion with at least a part thereof located against the second major surface of the fluid filtration material so as to mechanically clamp the component in fluid-tight relationship to the material. Preferably, the filtration material is at least somewhat compressed in the attached state of the component and web.

[0017] The present invention also provides a method of manufacturing a web and component combination as set out above, wherein the method comprises the steps of providing a web comprising a layer of filtration material, the web having first and second major surfaces and an aperture, providing a component that comprises a base and a deformable extension member that extends from the base, positioning the base of the component against the first major surface of the web with the extension member extending through the aperture, and then deforming the extension member back toward the base so that at least a part of the extension member abuts against the second major surface of the web and clamps the component in fluid-tight relationship to the material.

Brief description of the drawings

[0018] **Fig. 1** is a cross-sectional view taken through a component that is in the process of being attached to filtration material by a method of attaching the component in accordance with the present invention;

[0019] **Fig. 2** is a rear plan view of the component illustrated in **Fig. 1** in the process of being attached to the filtration material;

[0020] **Fig. 3** is a cross-sectional view similar to **Fig. 1** but showing in the component as it is attached to the filtration material by a method in accordance with the present invention;

[0021] **Fig. 4** is a rear plan view similar to **Fig. 2** to showing the component as attached to the filtration material by a method in accordance with present invention;

[0022] **Figs. 5A through 5E** are schematic illustrations in sequence of a component in the process of being attached to filtration material by one method in accordance with the present invention, and in particular, **Fig. 5A** shows a component positioned within an opening provided through a layer of filtration material, the

component also including a central opening and an extension member surrounding the central opening by which the component is to be attached to the filtration material, and a forming punch and die arrangement in a completely open state with the die positioned to support the component and to extend within the central opening of the component and the punch spaced away from the extension member of the component; **Fig. 5B** shows the component positioned through the filtration material with the punch advanced so as to contact and begin deforming the extension member of the component; **Fig. 5C** shows the component position through the filtration material with the punch further advanced so as to contact a stop portion of the die and with the extension member of the component further deformed; **Fig. 5D** shows the component positioned through the filtration material with the punch contacting the die and a second component of the punch advanced further for bending the extension member back toward the component; and **Fig. 5E** shows the component positioned through and attached to the filtration material by the further advance of the second component of the punch whereby the extension member is deformed sufficiently back toward the component, and so that at least a surface portion of the deformed extension member abuts against the filtration material to provide a mechanical clamping of the component to the filtration material;

[0023] **Fig. 6** is an enlarged partial cross-sectional view of the extension member of the component of **Figs. 1-5** illustrating a modified formation thereof, where in the extension is tapered from the component side to its tip and having a protrusion to facilitate its attachment to a layer of filtration material;

[0024] **Fig. 7** is an enlarged partial cross sectional view similar to **Fig. 6**, wherein the extension is tapered from the component side to its tip and includes grooves defined for providing weakened zones that will define bends that will be formed during the attachment process;

[0025] **Fig. 8** is similar to **Fig. 3** but shows an alternative configuration of a manner of attaching the filtration material to a component;

[0026] **Fig. 9** is also similar to **Fig. 3** but shows yet another alternative configuration of a manner attaching the filtration material to component;

[0027] **Fig. 10** is a perspective view of an exhalation valve that is suitable for connection to a respiratory mask in accordance with the present invention;

[0028] **Fig. 11** is a rear view of the exhalation valve of **Fig. 10**;

[0029] **Fig. 12** illustrates the exhalation valve of **Figs. 10** and **11** attached to a respiratory mask and positioned on the face of the user;

[0030] **Fig. 13** is a rear view of a respiratory mask including an exhalation valve, the respiratory mask being of the folded type and illustrated in an unfolded state;

[0031] **Fig. 14** is a perspective view of the respiratory mask of **Fig. 13** from the front side with the respiratory mask in a folded state;

[0032] **Fig. 15** is a perspective view of the respiratory mask of **Fig. 13** from the rear side with the respiratory mask in a folded state;

[0033] **Fig. 16** is a schematic illustration of an inline process for making respiratory masks such as illustrated in **Figs. 12 – 15** including process steps for attaching a component, namely an exhalation valve, to each of the respiratory masks in line with the production of the respiratory masks from a plurality of layers including a layer of filtration material;

[0034] **Fig. 17** is a partial top plan view showing the sequential build-up of layers in making a composite web material including a filtration material that is suitable for making respiratory masks of the type that are constructed in accordance with process of **Fig. 16**;

[0035] **Fig. 18** is a partial top plan view of the materials in making the respiratory masks in accordance with a process of **Fig. 16** with the respiratory masks partially formed after formation of fold lines and side edge heat seals;

[0036] **Fig. 19** is a partial back view of the materials in making the respiratory masks in accordance with the process of **Fig. 16** with the respiratory masks substantially formed and with headband material positioned on and connected with the respiratory masks;

[0037] **Fig. 20** is a partial back view of a plurality of respiratory masks that have been formed in accordance with a process of **Fig. 16** and with the respiratory masks fully formed but still attached to one another;

[0038] **Fig. 21** is a schematic illustration of a portion of the process illustrated in **Fig. 16** showing a punch and die arrangement and a manner of control thereof for

attaching a component in line with a respiratory mask making process in accordance with the present invention;

[0039] **Fig. 22** is a schematic illustration of the portion of the process illustrated in **Fig. 21** from a top view;

[0040] **Fig. 23** is a front view of a molded-type respiratory mask combined with a component, namely an exhalation valve, wherein the component can be attached to the molded respiratory mask by a method in accordance with the present invention;

[0041] **Fig. 24** shows a filter bag of the type usable within a vacuum cleaner including a component attached through an opening of the filter bag material, wherein the component can be attached to the filter bag by a method in accordance with present invention; and

[0042] **Fig. 25** is a view from one side of an air filter that can be used with a respiratory mask including a component attached to the air filter by a method in accordance with the present invention.

Detailed description of the preferred embodiments

[0043] With reference to the drawings, wherein like components are labeled with like numerals throughout the several figures, a manner of attaching a component **10** to a portion of any length of filtration material **12** is illustrated in **Figs. [1 – 5] 1 - 5**. Filtration material **12** is illustrated to represent any known filtration material, the purpose of which is to remove any constituent portion of a fluid to be filtered from the fluid as the fluid passes through the filtration material, including filtration materials that contain only one or more than one filter layer. Moreover, the illustrated layer of filtration material **12** is meant to include composite webs that incorporate filtration material (one or more filter layers) with other structure and/or in combination with additional layers other than filter layers. The component **10** can be any component for which attachment to the filtration material **12** is desired, and typically comprises an element that adds some feature to the filtration material depending on any particular application. For example, in the case of a respiratory mask, to which the present invention is particularly directed, such a component **10** may comprise an exhalation valve, a harness, eye shield, headband, or the like, or a portion of any of such component that is to be secured to a filtration material **12**

that is suitable for use in making a respiratory mask. Other filtration materials **12** are contemplated for any number of other applications to be combined with other components **10** that may be suitable for such other applications, some of which other applications are described below. The present invention is directed to the methods of attaching such a component **10** to a filtration material **12** and the resultant combination of the filtration material **12** with the component **10**.

[0044] As illustrated in **Fig. 1**, the component **10** is positioned to pass through an opening **14** provided through the filtration material **12**. The shape of the opening **14**, as shown in **Fig. 2**, is circular, but it is understood that the shape of the opening **14** can be any shape. Preferably, the opening **14** is shaped to correspond with the shape of a deformable extension member **16** of the component **10**, particularly where the extension member **16** passes directly through the opening **14** of the filtration material **12**. As also shown in **Fig. 1**, the opening **14** may be sized just slightly larger than the dimension of the extension member **16** of component **10**.

[0045] The component **10** also preferably includes a base portion **18** that at least partially surrounds, and preferably completely surrounds, the opening **14** of the filtration material **12** when the extension member **16** of the component **10** is positioned within the opening **14**. Base portion **18** thus provides a surface portion **20** for lying against a portion of a first major surface **22** of the filtration material **12** just adjacent to its opening **14**. A second major surface **24** of the filtration material **12** [and] also includes a portion thereof that surrounds opening **14** which will be used for contacting at least a portion of the extension member **16** of component **10** when it is modified in accordance with the attachment process described below. Component **10** [and], as illustrated, also comprises a central opening **26** and surface features **28** that are provided extending from the base portion **18** and away from the deformable extension member **16** for the purpose of facilitating a mounting of an additional component thereto. That is, the surface features **28** are provided, for example, as portions of a connection system that cooperate with other portions of the connection system provided on a further component. The opening **26** is provided, in the illustrated case, for the purpose of permitting the controlled passage of fluid through the component **10** as part of the functional feature that is desired to be added to the filtration material **12** by the component **10**. The opening **26** and surface

features **28** are entirely dependent on the particular application and functional feature of the component **10** based on any particular application. Neither need be provided if not desired for any particular application. That is, the present invention is characterized in that any component **10** including a deformable extension member **16** and a base portion **18** can be attached to any shaped article or length of filtration material **12** having an opening **14**.

[0046] As illustrated in **Fig. 2**, the extension member **16** passes through opening **14** of the filtration material **12** so as to extend from the second major surface **24** of the filtration material **12**. Base portion **18**, and in particular its surface portion **20** lies against the first major surface **22** of filtration material **12**. The shape of the base portion **18** is illustrated in a preferable shape of a rectangle that is provided about the central opening **26** of component **10**. As with the shape of opening **14** and/or the shape of extension member **16**, the base portion **18** can be shaped in any desired shape taking into account the particular application. It is preferable that the base portion **18** be sized and shaped to facilitate a good mechanical connection of the component **10** to the filtration material **12** in accordance with the attachment method described below. As noted above, the base portion **18** need not extend completely about the extension member **16**, but preferably extends about the extension member **16** sufficiently to aid in the attachment method described below. For example, the base portion **18** may instead comprise one or more tabs that are arranged radially and that extend from the extension member **16**.

[0047] In accordance with a present invention, the extension member **16** is modified from its state illustrated in **Fig. 1** to a state where it mechanically clamps with base portion **18** the component **10** to the filtration material **12**. One such modification is illustrated in **Fig. 3** where a reverse bend **30** is defined within the extension member **16** by bending a tip **32** of the extension member **16** back toward the base portion **18** (in the axial direction of the opening **26** provided through component **10**) and a radial extending portion **34** is defined within the extension member **16** by further radially bending the tip **32**. By this configuration, an attachment surface **36** is provided by a portion of the outside surface of the extension member **16** of component **10**. A portion of the filtration material **12** immediately surrounding opening **14** on both the first and second major surfaces **22** and **24** of filtration material **12** is thus sandwiched between the attachment

surface **36** of extension member **16** and surface portion **20** of base portion **18**. The effect is an effective mechanical clamping of the component **10** to the filtration material **12** as provided within the opening **14** of the filtration material **12**. Preferably, a "fluid tight" connection is provided between the component **10** and the filtration material **12**, meaning that there preferably is no path between the filtration material and any surface of the component **10** that permits a significant quantity of unfiltered fluid to pass from one major surface of the filtration material to the other major surface of the filtration material. A significant quantity of fluid is one that detracts from the intended function of the filtration material in removing a constituent of the filtered fluid from the fluid to be filtered.

[0048] In order to enhance a fluid tight seal, it is preferable that the filtration material **12** that is sandwiched between surfaces **20** and **36** of component **10** actually be compressed or crushed at least somewhat during the process of the forming or bending the extension member **16** of component **10**. This compressing or crushing helps create a better fluid tight seal in that the component surfaces **20** and **36** are more intimately in contact with the filtration material **12**. If the filtration material **12** includes or is part of a web having additional layers, the layers are also maintained in better sealing relationship with one another. Moreover, sealants or adhesives may be provided between one or both of the interfaces between the first major surface **22** of filtration material **12** and surface portion **20** of base **18** and between the second major surface **24** of filtration material **12** and surface **36** of extension member **16**. Adhesive or sealant may also be applied between layers, if provided. Any conventional known or developed sealant or adhesive that is compatible with the material of the component **10** and filtration material **12** is contemplated.

[0049] It is also contemplated to secure the component **10** to the filtration material **12** so as to prevent rotation of the component **10** relative to the filtration material **12**. One way of doing this is to simply shape both the deformable extension member **16** of component **10** and the opening **14** of the filtration material **12** as noncircular shapes. Otherwise, a gripping feature (not shown) may be provided extending from either or both of the attachment surface **36** and surface portion **20** of component **10** for extending into the thickness of the filtration material **12** for gripping and preventing such relative

rotational movement. A gripping feature can comprise, for example, one or more spikes or ribs extending from one or both surfaces **36** and **20**. Alternatively, an amount of adhesive can be provided at either or both interface between the filtration material **12** and surfaces **36** and **20** of component **10** to prevent this relative rotation. Of course, adhesive and gripping features can be used in combination as well.

[0050] In **Fig. 4**, the component **10** is illustrated after it has been effectively connected with the filtration material **12**. That is, the reverse bend portion **30** formed from the extension member **16** is seen as being annular and concentric with the central opening **26** of the component **10**. It is preferred that the bend portion **30** be annular since this facilitates its formation by [aid the forming process described below with minimized] the forming process described below with minimal difficulties. However, other shapes are contemplated as noted above, which other shapes may require other compensation steps or features to permit the reverse bend to be made. For example, with a rectangular extension member **16** (as viewed in top plan view), it may be necessary to provide slits at the corners thereof so as to permit each side wall to be reverse bent upon itself. Additionally, the radial extending portion **34** made from the extension member **16** is also illustrated as an annular surface in **Fig. 4**. The shape of this radial portion **34** is also based upon the shape of the extension member **16** in that it is formed from it. Other shapes of the extension member **16** would otherwise dictate the shape of the radial extending portion **34**.

[0051] One specific method that can be used for deforming the extension member **16** of a component **10** so as to provide an effective connection of the component **10** to the filtration material **12** in accordance with the present invention is schematically illustrated in sequence in **Figs. 5A** through **5E**. In general, such a deforming process that is capable of bending such extension member **16** back upon itself may be considered a cold forming process or a heat forming process depending on the material of the object **10**, and in particular the material of the extension member thereof and the degree of deformation that is required. A cold forming process is considered to be any process whereby the deformation can take place without having to introduce heat to the extension member **16** during the deformation steps. A heat forming process is one where heat is introduced to facilitate the ability to deform the extension member **16**. A heat forming process may be

required where the object **10** and its extension member **16** comprise a thermoplastic material (such as a relatively stiff polymeric material like polystyrene or a styrene-butadiene copolymer) that otherwise might break during a deforming process. A cold forming process may be conducted where the material of the object **10** is a sufficiently deformable material (such as a relatively softer polymeric material like polypropylene) that is capable of plastically yielding but not breaking during a controlled (but not heated) forming process. The following description of the method illustrated in **Figs. 5A** through **5E** preferably relates to a cold forming process so that the extension member **16** of the object **10** can be bent back upon itself to provide an annular bend portion **30** and a radial extending portion **34**. A heat forming process would be similar but would include the introduction of heat of sufficient magnitude and at least at the yielding locations to permit deformation or reforming of the extension member **16** to form the bend portion **30** and radial extending portion **34**.

[0052] Starting with **Fig. 5A**, an object **10** is positioned within a receiving portion **38** of a die **40**. Die **40** also includes a central portion **42** that fits within the central opening **26** of the object **10** and defines a stop surface **44** at its distal end. If the object **10** is not provided with a central opening, the die **40** need not include such a central portion **42** and a stop surface could otherwise be provided. Die **40** also provides an anvil surface **46** upon which the base portion **18** can rest. Anvil surface **46** is preferably annular for the purpose of supporting an annular base portion **18**; however, it need not be coextensive with the base portion **18**. That is, it may extend radially by a greater or lesser amount than the extension of the base portion **18** and it need not extend all the way around die **40**. With the object **10** supported by the die **40**, extension member **16** of object **10** is inserted through the opening **14** of the filtration material **12**. A punch assembly **48** is positioned in axial alignment with the die **40** and is operatively connected with a reciprocal drive device or system (not shown) for moving the punch assembly **48** in its axial direction. Any known or developed reciprocal drive device or system is contemplated. Moreover, it is contemplated that both of the punch assembly **48** and the die **40** be driven, as conventionally known, or that the die **40** be reciprocally driven relative to a fixed punch assembly **48**. Furthermore, the punch assembly **48** and/or the die **40** may be driven to move linearly or otherwise so long as the relative movement and a deformation process,

such as described and/or suggested below, can be completed. The punch assembly 48 preferably comprises a first inner punch 50 and a second outer punch 52 that are independently movable relative to one another for the purposes described below. In this case, the inner punch 50 and outer punch 52 are preferably independently connected with suitable drive devices or systems to provide the requisite movement. Preferably, the outer punch 52 can be driven with the inner punch 50, but can be further actuated to extend farther even after the inner punch 50 is stopped. In this regard, inner punch 50 can include a stop surface 54.

[0053] In **Fig. 5B**, the punch assembly 48 is illustrated at an advanced position with forming surface 56 of the inner punch 50 in contact with the interior of the extension member 16 of object 10. More specifically, the forming surface 56 of punch 50 comprises a tapered surface extending annularly about the punch 50 so as to contact the inside of the circular tip 32 of extension member 16 when the first punch 50 is advanced. Advancing inner punch 50 after initial contact causes a deformation of the extension member 16 substantially in accordance with the slope of the forming surface 56. The first inner punch 50 advances until its stop surface 54 contacts the stop surface 44 of die 40, as shown in **Fig. 5C**. During this advancement, the extension member 16 of object 10 is continually deformed under the guidance of forming surface 56 and a tapered forming surface 58 provided at the end of outer punch 52. As noted above, movement of inner punch 50 preferably also moves the outer punch 52 the same distance.

[0054] Once the inner punch 50 is stopped against the die 40, the outer punch 52 can be actuated so as to cause relative movement of the outer punch 52 to the inner punch 50. The continued advancement of the outer punch 52 causes a further deformation of the extension member 16 of object 10 as illustrated in **Fig. 5D**. At this point, the tip 32 of extension member 16 begins to bend back toward the base portion 18 of the object 10. Moreover, the bend portion 30 formed in the extension member 16 begins to be clearly defined where the extension member 16 abuts the forming surface 56 of the first punch 50. Further advancement of the outer punch 52 causes the extension member 16 to completely fold back on itself with the bend portion 30 clearly defined. Then, an end portion of the extension member 16, a portion of the filtration material 12 surrounding its opening 14, and the base portion 18 are preferably pinched between the inner tip of the

tapered surface **58** of the outer punch **52** and the anvil surface **46** of the die **40**. Thus, the bend portion **30** is completely defined and the radial extending portion **34** is completed. The attachment surface **36** of the radial extending portion **34** of the extension member **16** is positioned against the second major surface **24** of the filtration material **12** with its first major surface **22** against surface **20** of base portion **18**. As noted above, preferably, the force provided by the second outer punch **52** is sufficient to at least partially compress the filtration material **12** that is positioned between the radial extending portion **34** and the base portion **18**. Once the bend portion **30** and radial extending portion **34** are fully defined, the inner and outer punches **50** and **52** can be retracted so that the deformed component **10** can be removed from its position supported by die **40**. That is to say, the deformed component **10** is now effectively connected to the filtration material **12**. The same sequence of operations can be performed on a next component **10** to be connected to another filtration material **12**, or the same filtration material **12** depending on the specific process and particular application.

[0055] In the absence of central opening **26** through component **10**, die **40** would not include a central portion **42** that extends through the component **10**. Moreover, stop surface **44** would not be provided. Component **10** would still include an extension member **16** in accordance with the present invention which could be deformed in the same manner described his above. The extension member **16** could be tubular, which shape in plan view could be any shape, such as circular, rectangular, etc. Movement of the inner punch **50** could be limited by any other conventional means, such as by simply controlling the extent of its advancement by controlling its drive device or system (not shown). The deformation process could otherwise be the same.

[0056] In the case where the central opening **26** through a component **10** includes other structural components, such as cross braces or other elements, the die **40** may still include its central portion **42** for extending through the component **10** and for providing a stop surface **44**. However, it may be necessary to provide one or more relief areas (i.e. grooves or cut away portions) so that the center portion **42** can pass sufficiently within and through one or more portions of the central opening **26** of the component **10**. Or, even with a center portion **42** having such relief areas, movement of the punch and die can be otherwise limited, such as is noted above.

[0057] In order to drive the inner and outer punches **50** and **52**, respectively, any suitable drive mechanism that is known or developed can be utilized. Each punch can be independently driven and preferably synchronized or a common drive mechanism could move them together and permit the farther extension of the outer punch **52**. For example, a common drive device could include a single actuator that may be pneumatically, hydraulically, electrically or mechanically driven that is operatively connected with the punch assembly **48**. In particular, such an actuator can be connected with the outer punch **52** so as to move it over its full range of movement, and the inner punch **50** can be operatively connected with the outer punch **52** by way of a slip or play permitting means. A spring (not shown) could be provided between the inner punch **50** and the outer punch **52** that is stiff enough so that movement of the outer punch **52** translates into direct movement of the inner punch **50** until the inner punch **50** is stopped. Thus, when the stop surface **54** of the inner punch **50** contacts the stop surface **44** of die **40**, its movement is stopped. But, the outer punch **52** can continue to advance under the drive of its attached actuator with its relative movement with respect to the inner punch **50** taken up by the spring or any other slip or play means.

[0058] It is also contemplated that the deforming operation schematically illustrated in **Figs. 5A – 5E** could be conducted by a single punch. That is, a single punch can be provided with a forming surface that itself can define the desired shape of the extension portion after full advancement thereof. As in the above described example, a punch could be advanced so that when the material of the extension portion **16** yields sufficiently, it will fold over on itself. Further advancement can then also define the radial extending portion **34**.

[0059] Alternative configurations for the extension member **16** of **Figs. 1 - 5** are illustrated in **Figs. 6** and **7**. Shown are partial cross-sectional views that illustrate the cross-section through the wall defining the extension member of the component and a portion of its base portion. In particular, in **Fig. 6**, an extension member **60** is illustrated having an outer tip **62** and an inner pedestal **64**. A protrusion **66** is also preferably provided extending radially outwardly from the pedestal **64** and partially above base portion **68**. Between the outer tip **62** and the pedestal **64**, a deformable section **63** of the extension member **60** is defined, which is preferably tapered at its external surface from

the pedestal **64** to the outer tip **62**. By making the deformable section **63** tapered toward the outer tip **62**, the extension member **60** is increasingly more easily deformable toward the outer tip **62**. Additionally, the tapered deformable section **63** advantageously facilitates the ability to form the component by a molding process, such as injection molding. This configuration facilitates the bending back of the extension member **60**, such as in the manner described above, for securing the component to filtration material. The pedestal **64** provides a substantially rigid section of the extension member **60** so as to provide [and] an undeformed upstanding part of the component after deformation is complete. The protrusion **66** is preferably provided to help hold the filtration material in place relative to the base portion **68** after the deformation step is performed. Also the protrusion **66** enhances the making of a fluid tight seal between an inner edge of the filtration material that defines the opening **14** through the filtration material and the component that is attached thereto. As above, preferably the extension member **60** and thus its deformable portion **63**, pedestal **64** and protrusion **66** are generally circular in a transverse cross-section of the extension member **60**.

[0060] In **Fig. 7**, an extension member **70** is illustrated having an outer tip a **72**, a deformable portion **73** and pedestal **74**. Like the **Fig. 6** embodiment, the deformable portion **73** is preferably tapered along its outer surface from the pedestal **74** toward the tip **72** to facilitate insertion thereof into an opening of filtration material, manufacturing thereof, and deformation thereof toward base portion **78**. At a point partially spaced inward from the outer tip **72** and along the inside wall of the deformable portion **73**, a groove **76** can be provided that further facilitates the bending of the extension member **70** into the attachment process, such as described above. A second groove **77** may also be provided on the outer wall of the deformable portion **73** adjacent to where it connects with the pedestal **74** to also facilitate the bending of the extension member **70**. That is, the thinned areas created by the grooves **76** and **77** will yield more easily than the areas just adjacent thereto so as to define the points where the extension member **70** will bend during the attachment process. With regard to the initial example described above, the groove **77** will facilitate the definition of the bend portion **30** and the groove **76** will facilitate creation of radial extending portion **34** by defining the bend line that is formed adjacent to it. The pedestal **74** will create an undeformed upstanding part of the

component after deformation is complete. Again, the extension member **70** and thus its deformable portion **73**, pedestal **74** and grooves **76** and **77** preferably extend in a generally circular fashion as viewed in transverse cross-section. It is further noted that the modifications illustrated in **Fig. 6** and **7** may be used together with one another selectively or in combination.

[0061] Alternative attached configurations between a component and filtration material are illustrated in **Figs. 8** and **9**. In **Fig. 8**, a component **80** is illustrated connected to a filtration material **12**. An extension member **82** is provided through an opening of the filtration material **12**, but the opening through the filtration material **12** is sized smaller than the outer diameter of the extension member **82**. That is, a peripheral portion of the filtration material **12** just adjacent its opening is turned up along the outer wall of the extension member **82**, such as when the object **80** is inserted through the opening of the filtration material **12**. This turning up of filtration material may be facilitated by the inherent flexibility of the filtration material **12** or may require reliefs or cuts from the opening edge. In any case, when the extension member **82** is bent back toward the base portion **84** of component **80** to make a bend portion **86**, a peripheral portion **85** of the filtration material **12** is sandwiched between vertical portions **87** and **88** of the extension member **82** in addition to it being provided between a radial extending portion **89** and the base **84**. As above, it is preferable that the filtration material **12** including its peripheral portion **85** be at least somewhat compressed to provide an airtight attachment configuration, even where multiple layers are involved. This alternative [configurations] configuration can be produced in accordance with the same method described above with reference to **Figs. 5A** through **5E**, but with the additional step of turning the peripheral portion **85** of the filtration material **12** vertically along a bit of the outer wall of the extension member **82** prior to the deformation operation.

[0062] As will be well understood to one of ordinary skill in the art, the punch and die configuration can be modified as to their spacing relative to one another and the extent of relative movement with respect one another so as to accomplish any number of similar modifications. For example, the inner tip edge of the outer punch **52**, described above, can be provided more closely to the point where the extension member of the component first hits the forming surface **56** of the inner punch **50** so that when the outer

punch **52** is fully advanced, the vertical portions on either side of the defined bend are provided closer to one another. This may be used to create a greater compression or crush of the filtration material peripheral portion **85** therebetween. As above, formation of the bend **86**, vertical portion **88** and radial extending portion **89** may be performed by cold forming the extension member **82** if its material is sufficiently malleable (i.e. having the ability to be plastically deformed without breaking) at normal temperatures, or may be thermally formed with the addition of heat.

[0063] In **Fig. 9**, a component **90** having an extension member **92** is inserted within an opening of filtration material **12** in a similar manner as that described above with reference to **Fig. 8**. As a result, a portion **99** of the filtration material **12** is sandwiched between vertical portions **97** and **98** that are separated by bend **96**. This configuration is, however, different in that no radial extending portion is created. Instead, an end surface of the tip **93** of the extension member **92** is directed against the second major surface **24** of filtration material **12** to effectively hold the component **90** to the filtration material **12**. Again, such a configuration can be created accordance with the method discussed above with reference to **Figs. 5A** through **5E**. In this case, the initial length of the extension member **92** is chosen so that upon the creation of the bend **96**, the tip **93** will be directed into the filtration material **12** by the further movement of the outer punch **52** in the manner described above.

[0064] It is understood that the modifications disclosed in **Figs. 8** [in] and **9** may be used in any number of ways and modifications. For example, a configuration similar to **Fig. 9** can be created without the portion **99** of filtration material provided between vertical portions **97** and **98**. Other configurations are also contemplated wherein at least some portion of the extension member of any component be in contact with a second major surface of the filtration material while a base portion of such component is at least partially in contact with a first major surface of the filtration material.

[0065] As noted above, the component **10** can be any component that is to be attached to a fluid filtration material **12**. Moreover, the component **10** can be formed from any suitable material(s) provided that the extension member thereof is capable of being deformed, as described above, which deformation can be conducted as a cold process or a heat forming process. Preferred materials include yieldable thermoplastic

polymers, such as, for example, polypropylene, polyethylene, or polyester. These polymers are preferred in that they can be deformed by a cold forming process. Other more brittle thermoplastic polymers including polystyrene and copolymers such as styrene-butadiene are also usable, but they would likely require the addition of heat as part of a thermal forming process.

[0066] In the context of respiratory masks, [As] as discussed in the Background section of this application, the component **10** can be the base of a respirator exhalation valve or an attachment member for a respirator harness or eye shield. In the making of the respiratory masks, the filtration material **12** typically provides the body of the respirator (whether flexible and foldable or pre-formed) and the component adds a feature to the basic mask structure. The same is often true for many other types of filters; for example, vacuum cleaner bags that include a fluid inlet/outlet that is attached to the filter bag for connection with a vacuum cleaner. With this in mind, various possible forms for the component **10** and filtration material **12** are described below so as to illustrate a wide range of situations in which the attachment methods described and suggested above can be employed.

[0067] In **Figs. 10** and **11**, an exhalation valve **100** is illustrated that may be secured in the manner of the present invention to a respiratory mask, for example, such as a foldable and flexible respiratory mask **102** illustrated in **Fig. 12** or a pre-formed respiratory mask **104** illustrated in **Fig. 23**. The valve shown in **Figs. 10** and **11** comprises a valve body **106** that includes a base portion **107** that preferably extends entirely around the periphery of the exhalation valve **100**. The base portion **107** functions similar to the base portion **18**, described above, and includes a surface **108** for lying against an outer surface of the respiratory mask **102**. A valve cover **110** can be permanently or removably attached to the valve body **106** and provides openings **112** through which air can pass. Permanent attachment can be accomplished, for example, by applying adhesive or by a welding technique, such as ultrasonic welding. Removable attachment can be made, for example, by using resilient clips. The valve body **106** can include an attached flap-type valve **114** (shown in **Fig. 23**) that lies against a seat surface (not shown) that surrounds a valve opening **118** so that the flap valve functions as a one-way valve that opens the opening **118** during exhalation. Such a valve is known and

commercially available and is described in US patent [No.] no. 5,325,892. The valve body **106** and valve cover **110** are preferably thermoplastic molded components, typically formed from a polypropylene material.

[0068] The valve body **106**, in accordance with the present invention, also includes an extension member **116** extending from the valve body **106** and away from its surface **108** that will lie against the respiratory mask **102**. The manner by which the extension member **116** is structurally connected with the valve body **106** is not critical, but it is preferred that the extension member **116** be integrally formed with the valve body **106** for structural strength. Moreover, it is preferable that the extension member **116** also be positioned about the central opening **118** (i.e. that it preferably be circular, tubular and hollow) so that the central opening **118** also defines a fluid flow passage through the exhalation valve **100**. As illustrated, structural cross members **120** may also be provided connected across the central opening **118** for structural integrity of the valve body **106** and to keep a flap-type valve **114** from being able to be sucked back into the central opening **118**.

[0069] As a result of the provision of the [valve seat] surface **108** and the extension member **116**, the exhalation valve **100** can thus be secured to a respiratory mask **102** or **104** in the manner described above with reference to **Figs. 5A** through **5E**. Specifically, the extension member **116** would be inserted through an opening provided in either respiratory mask **102** or **104**, after which the extension member **116** could be deformed in any way described or suggested above. Moreover, the exhalation valve **100** may be attached to the respiratory mask **102** or **104** either before or after the mask itself is formed. It is also contemplated that the attachment operation may be performed on a selective basis or as part of an inline manufacturing operation. An inline attachment operation can be performed at any point in the manufacturing line where there is sufficient access to the web in the making of a respiratory mask.

[0070] A foldable respiratory mask **102** is illustrated in **Figs. 12, 13, 14** and **15**. Basically, such a respiratory mask **102** includes filtration material that is defined to have a generally elliptical center panel **122** and upper and lower panels **124** and **126**. The exhalation valve **100** is preferably attached through an opening **128** provided in the center panel **122**. Again, the valve body **106** includes an extension member **116** that, as can be

seen in **Fig. 13**, is deformed to act with the surface **108** of the valve body **106** to secure the exhalation valve **100** to the center panel **122**. The respiratory mask **102** is designed so that when the panels **122**, **124** and **126** are reconfigured so that the mask **102** is expanded, a generally cup-shaped chamber is defined to be fit over the nose and mouth of a wearer. A headband **130** is further preferably provided as attached near the opposite longitudinal ends of the center panel **122**, and as illustrated, the headband preferably comprises a two-part headband, each part of which comprises a length of elastic material. The headband **130** can be conventionally secured to the filtration material making up the panels, such as center panel **122**, by heat sealing or adhesive or the like.

[0071] The advantage of respiratory mask **102** is that it can be folded flat for storage by folding the upper and lower panels **124** and **126** behind the center panel **122**. The folded respiratory mask **102** is illustrated in **Figs. 14** and **15**. Each of the panels **122**, **124** and **126** of the respiratory mask **102** typically comprises at least one layer of filtration material (i.e. a layer of filtration material capable of removing contaminants from air that passes through the filtration material) that is positioned between inner and outer cover webs. The center panel **122** may also advantageously include a layer of reinforcing material, and the upper panel **124** may also include a layer of foam material. Respiratory masks that are similar to that shown in **Figs. 12** through **15** are described in international published patent applications numbers **W0 96/28217 a** and **W0 97/32494**.

[0072] In **Fig. 16**, a forming process is schematically illustrated for making foldable type respiratory masks. Each manufacturing step is preferably performed in line with one another so as to define a high-speed inline process. In accordance with the present invention, this high-speed inline process can also advantageously include the mounting of a component, such as an exhalation valve, inline with the other process steps and at the same high speed of operation. In accordance with the illustrated method, the mask making process starts with a supply of outer cover web material **200**, preferably in the form of a roll of such material. As the outer cover web material **200** travels in the machine direction of the system, it is built upon with a number of other components that are layered together to produce the masks which are eventually cut from the stacked up layered material. A first preferable material added onto the outer cover web **200** is supplied at **202** to a cutting and applying station **204**. The material **202** preferably

comprises a deformable material such as a metal strip which can be cut into sections 206 in making deformable nose clips provided in the respiratory masks. To do this, discrete sections 206 of the material 202 are applied along the outer cover web 200 at spaced locations and near the web edge, one section 206 for each respiratory mask to be produced. Next, a reinforcement material 208 is preferably supplied in a continuous manner to provide a layer covering a central portion of the cover web 200. On top of the outer cover web 200 with the spaced sections 206 of nose clip material and the reinforcement material 208 thereon, a full width layer of filtration material 210 and subsequently an inner cover web material 212 are provided. At this point, a multi-layer composite web 214 is built-up from which the respiratory masks can be converted. It is noted that the various operations for cutting, applying and layering the various materials upon one another are not important features of the present invention, and any conventional or developed technique or process can be utilized in accordance with the present invention. It is preferable that these operations be performed inline so that a high speed manufacturing process results.

[0073] After the composite web 214 is formed, a welding station 216, preferably a heat sealing operation, provides heat seal lines defining the outside edges 218 and 220 (shown in Fig. 18) that will become the face-fitting edges of the respiratory masks. Next, a foam strip material 222 is preferably provided as a continuous material over the composite web material 214, and in particular, over the sections 206 of deformable nose clip material. In Fig. 17, the sequential layout of the web material 214 and foam strip 222 is illustrated in the machine direction indicated by arrow A from a top view of the composite web material 214. At the leading edge of the illustrated web material (the bottom of Fig. 17) the inner cover material 212 includes the foam layer 222 as a continuous layer covering a portion thereof. In the mid section of the illustration, prior to the application of the inner cover material 212, the filtration material 210 is shown, which covers, as illustrated at the trailing edge, the outer cover layer 200 having the centrally located reinforcement material 208 and section 206 of nose clip material thereon. At this point, is noted that the foam strip 222 and/or sections 206 of nose clip material may alternatively be positioned on the outer surface of either the inner cover web material 212 or the outer cover web 200, or the foam strip 222 could be positioned within the makeup

of the composite web material **214**. Moreover, any number of layers of filtration material **210** can be provided instead of just one layer as illustrated.

[0074] A next conversion step can comprise a scoring station **224** where scoring wheels define spaced parallel fold lines **226** (also shown in **Fig. 18**), the purpose of which is to divide the sequentially produced respiratory masks into central panels **228** and side panels **230** and **232**. After the scoring station **224**, a cutting station **234** is provided for trimming side edge refuse strips **236** by cutting the web material just outside the heat seal lines **218** and **220** at cutlines **238** and **240**, respectively (see **Fig. 18**). An opening **235** is also preferably cut through the web material at a point corresponding to a predetermined position for each mask at the cutting station **234**. The result at this point is an unlimited number of respiratory mask blanks **237** that each have an opening **235** and that are connected together in series. The next illustrated station preferably comprises a valving station **242**, where exhalation valves **245** are sequentially attached to each respiratory mask blank **237** in line with the other manufacturing operations. A manner of attaching the exhalation valves **245** by such a valving station **242** will be described in greater detail below.

[0075] Next, the sequentially connected respiratory mask blanks **237** with valves **245** are advanced to a folding station **244** whereby side panels **230** and **232** are folded inward at their respective fold lines **226** to form sequentially connected respiratory mask blanks **237** in their folded state. A top plan view of the mask blanks **237** with side panel **230** folded over first and side panel **232** folded over on top of side panel **230** is shown in **Fig. 19** (ignoring for the moment the other features illustrated in **Fig. 19** and discussed below).

[0076] The folded respiratory mask blanks **270** are then advanced to another welding station **246**, which, like station **216**, also preferably comprises a heat sealing operation. At welding station **246**, the mask blanks **270** are welded while in their folded state along lines **248** and **250**. This step welds web material of the folded side portions **230** and **232** with web material of a central panel **228** of the web **214** in arc portions that are spaced from and that generally correspond to the edges **218** and **220** of the side panels **230** and **232**, respectively. By this operation, a mask front panel is defined that is shaped as illustrated by the mask of **Fig. 14** (i.e. as an elongate oval with side tabs), and the

shaped front panel is connected with the side panels **230** and **232** so as to produce a respiratory mask that can be unfolded to a usable cup-shaped state.

[0077] Next, each folded respiratory mask **270** (still connected in series) is advanced to a headband attaching station **252** where headband material **254** is applied and attached to each mask **270**. Specifically, the headband material **254** is attached to each mask **270** at a series of locations **256** and **258**, as also shown in **Fig. 19**, so that individual headbands are connected to each mask **270**. This attachment can be done at each location **256** and **258** by a welding operation, by applying adhesive, or by otherwise providing a mechanical connection. Then, a final cutting station **260** trims the excess material **262** (see **Fig. 19**) from outside the weld lines **248** and **250** that define the strip of folded respiratory masks **270**.

[0078] Also at the cutting station **260**, the masks **270** are preferably at least partially separated from one another at edges **264** between the locations **256** and **258** where the headband material **254** is attached to the masks **270**. As shown in **Fig. 16**, each mask **270** may be completely separated at edges **264** so that each mask **270** is completely cut out from the excess material **262**. Alternatively, the masks **270** may be left partially connected at edges **264** by cutting a line of perforations or otherwise defining a line of weakening between the masks **270** (see **Fig. 20**). The masks **270** can then be easily separated for use. An advantage of leaving the masks **270** connected together is that they can be packaged in roll form. Also, a portion of the headband material **254** between headband attachment locations **256** and **258** may be removed during the cutting or perforation process, as illustrated in **Fig. 20** leaving the edges of the headbands spaced from one another. Alternatively, the headbands may terminate at the edges **264**.

[0079] Any of various materials may be employed in the process illustrated in **Fig. 16**, namely, as the filter layer **210**; the outer cover web material **200**; the inner cover web material **212**; the foam material **222**; the reinforcement material **208**; the nose clip material **202**; and the headband material **254**. Some specific materials that are suitable for making such respiratory masks are described in WO 96/28217, the entire disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference. Alternatively, the headband material **254** may be as described in WO 97/32493 or US patent no. 5,724,677, the entire disclosures of which are also incorporated herein by reference. However, many other headband

configurations and designs and attachment techniques are also possible including, for example, a headband that comprises two separate bands secured to the mask by staples.

[0080] Filtration material layers that are commonplace in respiratory masks, like the mask **102** shown in **Figs. 12 to 15**, often contain an entangled web of electrically charged melt-blown microfibers (BMF). BMF fibers typically have an average fiber diameter of about **10** micrometers (μm) or less. When randomly entangled in a web, they have sufficient integrity to be handled as a mat. Examples of fibrous materials that may be used as filters in a mask body are disclosed in US patent nos. 5,706,804; 5,472,481; 5,411,576 and 4,419,993. The fibrous materials may contain additives to enhance filtration performance, such as the additives described in US patent nos. 5,025,052 and 5,099,026 and may also have low levels of extractable hydrocarbons to improve performance. Fibrous webs also may be fabricated to have increased oily mist resistance as shown in US patent no 4,874,399. An electric charge can be imparted to non-woven BMF fibrous webs using techniques described in, for example, US patent nos. 5,496,507; 4,592,815 and 4,215,682. The outer and inner cover webs of the center and side panels (such as those indicated at **122**, **124** and **126** of the mask **102** shown in **Figures 12 – 15**) protect the filtration material layer from abrasive forces and retain any fibers that may become loosened from the filtration material layer. The cover webs may also have filtering abilities, although typically not nearly as good as those of the filtration material layer. The cover webs may be made from non-woven fibrous materials containing polyolefins and polyesters as described, for example in US patent nos. 4,807,619 and 4,536,440.

[0081] A manner by which the valves **245** can be attached through openings **235** to the series of connected respiratory mask blanks **237** will be described as follows with reference to **Figs. 21** and **22**. The following description relates to a manner by which a valve **245** can be attached to each respiratory mask while the respiratory masks are moved in a machine direction without stopping. That is, it is preferred that the attachment method comprise an inline operation that does not require stoppage of movement of the respiratory masks in order to perform the valving operation. It is, however, contemplated that the valving operation can instead be conducted while the connected series of respiratory masks are stopped. Moreover, as noted above, the valving

operation may be performed on such respiratory masks or any other filtration material that is to be converted to a filtration device on an individual basis or as part of a manufacturing line. A method by which the valves **245** can be attached to the respiratory mask blanks **237** without stopping is preferred in that a high speed attachment operation and manufacturing operation of respiratory masks can be performed.

[0082] As the series of connected respiratory mask blanks **237** enter the valving station **242** illustrated in **Fig. 16**, they have been provided with exhalation valve attachment openings **235** at the cutting station **234**. Otherwise, a separate cutting station could be provided within the valving station **242** for cutting the openings **235** in each mask blank **237**. Like the valving manner discussed above, it is preferable that the cutting operation be performed while the mask blanks **237** continue to move. Die cutting mechanisms are well known to perform such function inline and at high speeds within a manufacturing operation. Any appropriate cutting mechanism is contemplated depending on the particular system and application and whether the cutting operation is to be performed while the filtration material is moving or not.

[0083] Once the exhalation valve attachment openings **235** are provided, the respiratory mask blanks **237** are advanced, as shown in **Fig. 22**, to move adjacent to a valve attaching station **302** that comprises a guiding system **304**, a punch and die assembly **306**, a valve pick up station **308**, and a valve feeder **310**. As schematically illustrated in **Fig. 21**, the guiding system **304** comprises an upper guide track **312** that can be of a conventional construction and that preferably includes a stationary guide track and a transfer mechanism (not shown) that moves along the stationary guide track. Such a transfer mechanism can comprise any conventional or developed mechanism that may include a belt, chain or the like that may be driven in any manner as conventionally known. The guiding system **304** also comprises an upper cam track **314**, the purpose of which will be described below. As also schematically illustrated, the guiding system **304** also preferably includes a lower guide track **316** and lower cam track **318**, preferably of similar construction as upper guide track **312** and upper cam track **314**.

[0084] The transfer mechanism portion of the upper guide track **312** is connected with a punch assembly **320** that itself preferably includes an inner punch **322** and an outer punch **324** that are of similar construction as that discussed above with reference to **Figs.**

5A through 5E. By this, the punch assembly 320 can be moved at the speed of the transfer mechanism along the upper guide track 312. Moreover, the upper cam track 314 moves the punch assembly 320 to and away from the respiratory mask blanks 237 while they are also moving in the machine direction. Specifically, the upper cam track 314 provides a surface upon which a cam follower 326 rides. The cam follower 326 may comprise a roller, for example, that is rotationally mounted to an end of the punch assembly 320 that itself is constructed to facilitate passage of the cam track 314 and to permit the roller to ride therealong while the punch assembly is moved by the transfer mechanism. As can be seen in Fig. 21, the upper cam track 314 includes a cam portion 315 by which the cam follower 326 and thus the punch assembly 320 are moved toward and away from the respiratory mask blanks 237. This movement is utilized in deforming and attaching an exhalation valve 245 to a respiratory mask blank 237 in the manner described above with reference to Figs. 5A through 5E. This movement is also facilitated by the punch assembly 320 being slidably mounted to the transfer mechanism of the upper guide track 312.

[0085] The transfer mechanism portion of the lower guide track 316 is connected with a die assembly 328 that includes a die portion 330 for supporting a valve component thereon prior to the attaching operation and for also performing the attachment function in cooperation with the punch assembly 320. The die assembly 328 also includes a cam follower 332 that rides along a surface of the lower cam track 318 while the die assembly 328 is moved along the lower guide track 316 by its transfer mechanism (not shown). Like the upper cam track 314, the lower cam track 318 includes a cam portion 319 that causes the die assembly 328 to move to and away from the connected respiratory mask blanks 237, which movement is also utilized in deforming and attaching an exhalation valve 245 to a respiratory mask blank 237. Also, die assembly 328 is slidably connected with the transfer mechanism of the lower guide track 316. In order to effectively perform the attaching operation, the punch assembly 320 and the die assembly 328 are preferably synchronized with each other and driven at similar speeds, and the cam portions 315 and 319 of the upper and lower cam tracks 314 and 318, respectively, are relatively positioned so as to perform the attaching operation. It is preferred, for example, that the cam portion 319 cause the die assembly 328 to begin advancing to its forming position

earlier than the punch assembly **320** moves toward its forming position as guided by cam portion **315**, and that cam portion **315** cause the punch assembly **320** to retract sooner than die assembly does as guided by cam portion **319**. To do this, the cam portion **319** should be longer than cam portion **315** and it should be positioned to extend farther on both sides of the cam portion **315**. Of course, depending on any specific forming operation, the cam portions **315** and **319** could be otherwise aligned or positioned with respect to one another so that either side of the forming mechanism can be advanced prior to the other, or that both sides can be advanced at the same time. Moreover, the extent of movement facilitated by the cam portions **315** and **319** is preferably defined so as to provide sufficient movement and force to perform the deformation operation and attachment of the exhalation valve **245** to the mask blanks **237**. As above, preferably sufficient force is provided to at least partially compress or crush some of the material making up the respiratory mask blanks **237** to enhance the making of an airtight connection. Like the punch assembly described above with reference to **Figs. 5A – 5E**, the inner punch **322** is preferably operatively connected with the outer punch **324** by way of a slip or play means, such as a spring (not shown), so that the outer punch **324** can be drivingly connected to the cam follower **326** while the movement of the inner punch **322** can be limited to less movement, such as by the die **330**.

[0086] As shown in **Fig. 22**, the guiding system **304** can be provided in an elongated oval shape so as to provide straight portions connected by curved portions. Other shapes are contemplated so long as a particular function desired can be performed. At a first straight portion **334**, the valve pick up station **308** is preferably provided, the purpose of which is to load a valve component onto the die **330** while it is moving about the guiding system **304**. In conjunction with the valve pick up station **308**, the feeder **310** preferably supplies a continuous quantity of components to the valve pick up station **308**. The specific mechanisms that are utilized as the valve pick up station **308** and feeder **310** do not form a specific part of the present invention, and it is contemplated that any conventional or developed loading and feeding systems and mechanisms can be utilized in accordance with the present invention. The other straight section **336** preferably is aligned with the machine direction of the respiratory mask blanks **237** so that the attaching operation can be performed in line with the movement thereof. Moreover, the

machine speed of the mask blanks **237** should be synchronized to and matched with the speed of the transfer mechanisms of the guiding system **304** so that the die assembly **328** provides a valve component in alignment with the opening **235** of each mask blank **237** and so that the deforming step and attaching operation can be fully conducted along the straight section **336** without stopping. Furthermore, it is contemplated that plural punch and die assemblies (i.e. a combination of a punch assembly **320** with a synchronized die assembly **328**) may be provided that are commonly driven along the upper and lower guide tracks **312** and **316**, respectively, so that more than one attaching operation may be in progress at the same time along the straight section **336** of the guiding system **304**. To facilitate this, the straight section **336** can be appropriately sized.

[0087] A method such as described above for attaching exhalation valves **245** through openings **235** of the respiratory mask blanks **237** is particularly preferred because it can be carried out on a continuous basis and at high speeds. The speed of attachment can be easily synchronized with the machine speed of the mask making process. However, any method in accordance with present invention is advantageous in that filtration material or web composite constructions including filtration material can be effectively attached with components in an airtight manner. Moreover, such components can be attached so as to have a neat appearance on the inside of the component about the opening through which it extends because no visible raw edges or weld lines are seen. That is, the deformation process covers the opening edges. In addition, slight misalignment between a component and an opening is hidden and does not detract from the effective seal that the connection produces on both sides of the material. Yet another advantage is that the mechanical clamping that results from such an attachment process will act to hold the web material together. This is particularly advantageous where the web material comprises plural layers or where the web material includes particulate matter embedded therein (such as where a carbon-loaded web is employed) so that the component attachment holds the plural layers together and/or reduces the possibility of particulate loss. This action also facilitates a fluid tight seal between the layers to one another.

[0088] To assess the effectiveness of a method in accordance with that described above for attaching an exhalation valve to a respiratory mask, a number of masks of the

type shown in **Figs. 12** through **15** were produced in accordance with the process illustrated in **Fig. 16**. The base portions and extension members of the valve components were formed from a polypropylene material, and the center panels of the respiratory masks were comprised of a layer of BMF material provided between inner [an] and outer cover webs comprised of polypropylene spun-bond non-woven material. The quality of the seal between the component and the center panel of each mask was examined by measuring the amount of an indicator fluid that was able to pass from one side of the respiratory mask to the other when the exhalation valve itself was sealed in a closed position. The exhalation valves tested comprised those of the type illustrated in **Figs. 10** and **11**, wherein the flap-type valve was maintained in a closed state for each test. Fluid flow measurements were made using an automated filter tester of the type available, under the trade designation "CertiTest" model **8130** from TSI Incorporated of Shoreview, Minnesota, [U.S.A.] USA. With this instrument, the tested masks and valves were found to be comparable with similar masks in which the exhalation valve was attached to the web material by ultrasonic welding.

[0089] As noted above, it is also contemplated that any attachment method in accordance with the present invention can be used to attach any component to any filtration material or respiratory mask after the material or mask has been fully formed. As with the molded respiratory mask illustrated in **Fig. 23**, for example, the exhalation valve **100** may be attached to the respiratory mask **104** after it is pre-formed into its cup shape body for use to cover the mouth and nose of a wearer. Such pre-formed masks are known and described, for example, in US patent no. 5,307,796. Typically, the mask body comprises at least one layer of filtration material and a shaping layer that provides supporting structure to the mask body and for supporting the filter layer. The shaping layer can be made from any suitable material, for example, a non-woven web of thermally bondable fibers that are molded using conventional procedures into the cup shaped configuration. Typical features include the illustrated headband straps and a nose clip. In any case, an exhalation aperture (not shown) is provided either before or after the molding process so that the exhalation valve **100** can be attached using a method in accordance with [a] the present invention either prior to or after the molding process.

[0090] Any method in accordance with a present invention can also be used to secure other components to filtration material intended for use in other fields than respiratory masks. For example, in **Fig. 24**, air filtration material is illustrated that is formed into a filter bag **350** for use in a vacuum cleaner. Such filter bags are well known and may be formed from paper or other material that is pervious to the flow of air. Multi-layer fabrics are also well known. As illustrated, the filter bag **350** comprises a filtration material layer **352** provided between fabric support layers **354** and **356**. An inlet **358** is defined through the filter bag **350** that includes a component **360** that enables the filter bag **350** to be attached to the outlet of a vacuum cleaner in a conventional manner. The component **360** can be advantageously secured in position by any method in accordance with the present invention, and to that end, the component **360** is provided with an integral deformable extension member (not shown), like extension member **16** described above, that is utilized in the attachment operation. The component **360** could be secured to the filtration material before it is formed into the bag or after depending upon the manner of production thereof.

[0091] Yet another filter device is illustrated in **Fig. 25** which comprises a filter **370** having an attachment component **372** connected therewith. The illustrated filter **370** comprises a disposable filter that is intended to be releasably attached to a re-usable respiratory mask. The filter **370** is disc-shaped and comprises a circular piece of a multi-layer web material that is seamed, preferably by welding, around its circumference. Such web material typically comprises a micro-fiber layer positioned between layers of spun-bond material, which form the outer surfaces of the filter **370**. Filters of the general type shown in **Fig. 25** are known, and one such example is commercially available under the trade designation "2040 High Efficiency Filter," from Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company of St. Paul, Minnesota. The attachment component **372** is preferably connected to one of the outer layers of the spun-bond material. Thus, it is further preferable that the attachment component **372** be connected to one of the outer layers prior to its combination with the inner micro-fiber layer. Specifically, as shown in **Fig. 25**, a spun bond layer **374** includes a central opening to which the attachment component **372** is attached. A micro-fiber layer **376** is visible inside of the openings of both the spun bond layer **374** and the attachment component **372**. In accordance with the

present invention, the attachment component 372 includes an extension member that can be positioned through the opening of the spun bond layer 374 and can be deformed against its back surface. The attachment component 372 itself would otherwise include whenever additional features are desired for it to be releasably connectable with its respiratory mask or other item.

[0092] Any number of different filtration devices and materials are contemplated where there is a need to attach a component to the filtration material or any composite web having such a filtration material therein. As above, the inclusion of filtration material requires that a component be attached in a way to secure it in place and to provide an effective seal so as not to have a deleterious effect on the [filters] filters' purpose. That is, the attachment should not permit significant contaminants to be able to pass through it such that the fluid filtering is compromised. Other methods of attachment are also contemplated in accordance with the present invention for attaching any component that includes a deformable portion provided on one side of a web including filtration material and where the deformable portion can be utilized in conjunction with a base portion provided on the other side of the web so that a mechanical clamped attachment results.